Pennsylvania Swiss Family Names

CYRUS H. ESHLEMAN

One of the many interesting features of Pennsylvania German history is the changes in the spelling and the pronunciation of our family names. It has been generally recognized that many of these names have been Anglicized, but there has also been another process of change that has been recognized very little, if at all: the changes of Swiss names to Palatinate forms, or "Pfaelzerization," as we may term the process.

In my series of articles in the ECK (November, 1935) I stated that the Swiss settlers in Lancaster and portions of other counties, dropped their native dialect and adopted the dialect of the more numerous Palatine settlers in the counties farther north, retaining only a few of the Swiss words and forms. But family names, being much used in printed and in written form, as contrasted with the dialect in general, which until comparatively recently was only spoken, persisted longer. Yet many of the names have changed quite decidedly.

A typical and also well-known family Swiss name among the Pennsylvania Germans is that of Hoover. This name has always been Huber in Switzerland. In the Palatinate the medial **b** changes to the **w** sound, or English **v**. In the United States the long **u** changes to **oo**, this latter change being of course an Anglicized form. In Lancaster County about one-third of the family still spell the nume Huber, but probably nearly all pronounce it Hoover.

My own name, Eshleman or Eshelman, also typifies both kinds of changes. In Switzerland, where the name originated in Canton Bern, the spelling is Aeschlimann. In the Palatinate, where several branches have established themselves, it is Eschelmann. The **ae**, or umlauted **a** changes to **E**, and the Swiss diminutive medial syllable **li** changes to the Palatine diminutive **el**. In Pennsylvania the **c** was dropped from **Esch** and one **n** from **mann**. Here are two important Palatine and two important English changes. In Lancaster County and elsewhere many spell the name Eshleman. My older relatives still pronounce the name as though spelt **Eschli**. But the younger generations use the **el** pronunciation in the main, and even though they themselves use the **le** spelling, other people persist in writing and printing it Eshelman.

At the end of the Swiss family names the **li** pronunciation does not change, but **i** changes to **y** or **ey**. For example Nuessli becomes Nissley; Naegeli, Negley, etc. Or **i** alone changes to **y**, as Aebi to Eby; Luethi to Leedy, where several other changes also appear.

Similarly to Hoover, Gerber changes to Garver, Ebersold to Eversole, Oberholtzer to Overholtzer. Many others could be mentioned.

The reasons for the changes and the pressure in that direction are euphony and economy of effort, and these are also the reasons why the Swiss dialect in Pennsylvania gradually gave way to the Palatine dialect. Anglicization also tends to bring about the same changes. English, descended from the Germanic Anglo-Saxon dialects, has tended to do away with the umlauted sounds and the medial **b**. English "have" has **v** for the German **b** of "**haben**," and **v** in "give" for **b** in German "geben". But Pfaelzerization acted more directly and primarily on the Swiss family names. Hence the truth must be recognized that the Swiss names were both Pfaelzerized and Anglicized.

In a more general way we may say that those familiar with the two types of change can distinguish most of the Swiss names from the Palatine, and both classes from the more recent German immigrant descendants. The Swiss and Palatine earlier Pennsylvania German element have decidedly changed their names by the above methods and other methods as well, whereas the later German element have continued the German spelling. For instance, when one sees the name Snyder, he knows it is a Pennsylvania German family, while if it is Schneider, the probability is that the ancestor came over more recently.